

## CHAPTER 3

# Sunday Funnies

## Humor in Prayer and Worship

Humor is the  
prelude to faith,  
and laughter is  
the beginning  
of prayer.

—Reinhold Niebuhr<sup>34</sup>

**F**or many people of faith, Sunday mornings are about ritual. When I was a child, church-going was the central Sunday morning ritual: riding in the back seat of our green station wagon, passing through four towns and over the Mount Hope Bridge before arriving at a small white church with the ubiquitous red door. Inside were the sights, scents, sounds, and textures that I came to associate with prayer and worship: the maroon carpet that held the scents of candle smoke, spice, and dust; organ pipes, guitar strings, and the occasional clanking of the tambourine; the well-worn prayer books with the middle section of pages falling out. Here I absorbed the poetry of the collects, canticles, and the Great Thanksgiving. Here I learned about silence and celebration, about laughing and crying and praying in community.

Another ritual awaited me upon our return home. The *Providence Sunday Journal* arrived on our front porch every week, a heavy parcel smelling of newsprint and ink. After church, we would adjourn to the living room, where my mother clipped coupons and puffed on cheap cigarettes. My father sipped his coffee and studied the business section. My bailiwick was the full-color comic pages, where I got lost in the antics of *Broom-Hilda*, *Tiger*, *Beetle Bailey*, and *Boner's Ark*. Sometimes, my dad would pick up a dozen donuts on the way home; life was sweet and complete with a chocolate crème donut dropping powdered sugar onto the pages of my beloved comics.

As I got older, my interest expanded to include piles of *Peanuts* paperbacks, collected from yard sales and used book stores. Cheese puffs and cherry Kool-Aid replaced donuts as the snack of choice while poring over *Archie* comic digests, *Dennis the Menace*, and *Richie Rich*. These were the sacraments around which my Sunday-after-church ritual often revolved. (Ironically, cheese puffs are expressly banned during my comics workshops, for obvious, orange reasons.)

As an adult, I continue to be fascinated with comics and animated cartoons. A few years ago I was looking for a hook to use with young people who function within an increasingly image-saturated culture. An old *Peanuts* strip neatly articulates my struggle. In the first panel, Lucy is skipping rope when Linus approaches, blanket in hand. “Do you ever pray, Lucy?” he asks. Lucy replies, “That’s kind of a personal question, isn’t it? Are you trying to start an argument?” She becomes increasingly agitated: “I suppose you think you’re somebody pretty smart, don’t you?” she says in boldface. In the last panel, a shell-shocked Linus reports to Charlie Brown. “You’re right . . . religion is a very touchy subject.”<sup>35</sup>

Prayer is a particularly touchy subject. But does it have to be? Author and artist Sybil MacBeth wonders if prayer needs to be “a totally intense and serious activity. Can a spiritual practice be both prayer and play?”<sup>36</sup> I believe it can. My experience with youth groups has led me to embrace the power of humor to inform the act of praying and to radically change how one goes about teaching people about prayer. Prayer is, indeed, serious. But if prayer is authentic, it is also quirky, because we are quirky. It is through the quirky lens of pop-culturally-informed narrative that I approach the practice of prayer with my students.

## **A Case Study in Humor and Prayer**

When the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray, we hear for the first time what will come to be known as the Lord’s Prayer, and we learn a bit about what sort of outcomes we might expect when we pray. But it is on that first statement and how Jesus responds to it that guides this lesson on the outrageous nature of prayer.

The prayer Jesus teaches to his disciples is filled with words that are rich and evocative. Noun: Father. Adjective: Hallowed. Verb: Come. Adverb: Daily. It is like a holy game of Mad Libs.

Mad Libs is promoted as a “game for people who don’t like games.” As a youth minister, I have adopted Mad Libs as a useful teaching tool—a way to talk about prayer for people who don’t like praying.

This is a word game that can be played alone or by any number of players. The instructions are described as “ridiculously simple.” Each pad contains a series of stories with key words left out. One player selects a story. This player doesn’t tell the other players what the story is about. Instead, she asks them for a series of words. These words—nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs—are used to fill in the blank spaces. According to the creators of Mad Libs, when the completed page is read to the other players, they will discover that they have written a story that is “fantastic, screamingly funny, shocking, silly, crazy, or just plain dumb.”

These may not be words that we ordinarily associate with prayer. When was the last time your prayers were screamingly funny? But why is that? What is it about prayer that makes us take it so seriously? According to Julia Cameron, we needn’t be so uptight: “Prayer is talking to God. We can talk in a whisper. We can talk in a shout. We can talk in body language. We can talk in pictures. We can talk through music. We can talk through rhyme. What matters is less how we talk than that we talk.”<sup>37</sup>

We can also talk through cartoons and comics. Teenagers often find that the language of traditional prayer is inaccessible, cumbersome, and downright confusing. It doesn’t characterize the language of their everyday bumbling prayers. Perhaps this is why in my experience of working with kids, I see time and time again a reluctance to pray. Because they can’t keep up with the traditional language, they think their prayers are going to sound “just plain dumb.” This is patently untrue. I once asked for a volunteer to close out a youth group meeting with a prayer. After a period of awkward silence during which no one would make eye contact with me, one young man bravely agreed to try. We stood in a circle, bowed our heads, and closed our eyes. “God,” he said, “You’re great. Amen.” A chorus of “Amens” and some giggling ensued,

but I was struck by the simplicity and profound truth in those four words. Like the Mad Libs instructions suggest about the word game, prayer too can be “ridiculously simple.”

I shared this story during the St. John’s youth group meeting when we first began exploring the language of prayer. There were the expected groans when I introduced the topic, which turned into cautious interest when I insisted that prayer didn’t have to be hard or boring but could, in fact, be fun. We started with the prayer book. After reading aloud the collect of the day, which included such phrases as “penitent hearts,” “steadfast faith,” and “unchangeable truth,” I posed the question, “OK, so what did that just say?” Unsurprisingly, I was greeted by a series of blank stares and mumbling.

These teens are not the first ones to have trouble with the language of prayer. We might imagine a similar response of mumbles and blank looks from the disciples. After all, it is they who ask Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray.” We hear over and over that the disciples miss the point of sermons and parables, and Jesus is forever taking them aside to explain to them in simpler more mundane terms what he has just said. And what Jesus gives them is not so much a formula as a way to structure the vocabulary they already have. He fills in the blanks and he fills them in using words he knows will resonate with the disciples and make sense to them.

One year, the youth group took on the task of filling in the blanks, Mad Libs style. Through a series of exercises, we discovered our prayers as much as we wrote them. We learned that prayer can stretch the way we use our vocabulary and be ridiculously simple at the same time. Here is an example of a prayer written in less than five minutes by one of our youth group members:

God of all creation, you made the pale yellow walls of my  
bedroom and the ebony black of my neighbor’s saxophone.  
Open our eyes to see you everywhere, in everything.

In everything. We discovered that prayer could be silly as we included robots, polar bears, and bunnies in our intercessions.

We also learned that, like playing a game of Mad Libs, the act of prayer could be undertaken alone or by any number of people together.

Our meeting came full circle as we shifted from individual prayers to the now-slightly-less-daunting task of writing our own collect:

Gracious God, you are spectacular! We ask you to help us be happier and to heal the planet and everyone on it. Help us to make better choices; help us to help others. We ask this through Jesus Christ, who protects us from evil and does some pretty cool stuff.

This prayer is neither “screamingly funny” nor “just plain dumb.” It is an honest prayer put together by considering a series of questions: What is God like? What do you want to ask of God? How can you make the world a better place? These young people followed Jesus’s lead in filling in the blanks; but they did so using a combination of straightforward language, thoughtful consideration of what’s relevant to them, youthful enthusiasm, and a little bit of humor.

It was ridiculously simple.

Although I do teach kids about prayer and its many varieties and functions, I would never presume to teach anyone *how* to pray. I would, however, encourage those who struggle with prayer—and I am one of them—to find a balance between the lofty, poetic language of tradition and our own language of pale yellow walls, ebony black saxophones, and pretty cool stuff.

## Big Words

Pairing the silly words of the Mad Lib with images is the next logical step. Robert Short notes that the word “parable” translates into “word-picture” and goes so far as to suggest that these lessons are like “cartoons of the Bible.”<sup>38</sup> Short is not the only one to point out that while Jesus may not have been intentionally comical, he certainly made ample use of paradox, exaggerations, irony, absurdity, and what Elton Trueblood terms “deliberately preposterous statements” in order to make his point known.<sup>39</sup>

A study of religion in the funny pages posits that “religion and humor share certain functional affinities.”<sup>40</sup> Many cartoonists have enjoyed success poking fun at prayer and organized religion, at times

blurring the line between offensive commentary and playful irreverence. For the purposes of curricular inclusion, I focus here on comics and cartoons that can be said to treat prayer as it often exists—sincere, challenging, and, if we are honest, a bit absurd. Comic strips and books are more likely to allude to religious practice as a whole than to specifically tackle prayer, but there are a few that dare to address this “touchy subject.” Hank Ketchum’s *Dennis the Menace* and Bil Keane’s *Family Circus* characters are classic examples of kids who demonstrate both naïveté and profundity in their prayer lives. In one such strip, Dennis is seen kneeling at his bedside, hands folded, eyes closed. “Sorry,” he says, “I don’t know all those big words like our preacher does.”<sup>41</sup>

While researchers Lindsey and Hereen argue that the children portrayed in the comics demonstrate a “lack of appreciation of the seriousness of religious matters,”<sup>42</sup> I propose that the opposite is true: These fictional children’s honesty and curiosity can reveal the true nature of prayer. Similarly, it is my contention that the children and youth in our church programs approach prayer with an open-mindedness and simplicity from which we as educators, ministers, and persons of faith can learn. If cartoons and comics are places where people “grapple with issues of ethics, meaning, and values; engage in ritualized behavior; and explore both traditional and new”<sup>43</sup> religious practices, then it follows that this medium consisting of words and pictures can both inform and enrich the religious narrative.

The young people we encounter in church school and youth groups are indeed grappling. In my experience, humor not only softens their unwillingness to pray but also offers them permission to be themselves in the process. They don’t necessarily *need* the “big words” that the preacher uses in order to pray authentically.

Trueblood asserts that the “widespread failure to recognize and appreciate the humor of Christ is one of the most amazing aspects of the era named for Him . . . [r]eligion, we think, is serious business, and serious business is incompatible with banter.”<sup>44</sup> Contemporary cartoonists like David Wilkie and Cuyler Black, who often connect prayer with humor, know that it is within the banter that truth often reveals itself.

Wilkie accomplishes the task of connecting prayer and humor in his unusual strip, *Coffee with Jesus*. His characters, replete with

foibles, doubts, and misplaced priorities, seek to draw closer to God through conversation . . . that is to say, through prayer. Wilkie admits that one of his goals is to introduce readers to “a practical savior, one who use(s) humor, sarcasm and gentle ribbing to address their concerns.”<sup>45</sup> Here is a conversation between Carl and Jesus:

*Carl:* Back then, in Bible times, did you have a sense of humor, Jesus?

*Jesus:* Nope. Walked around dead serious, somber. Once in a while I could muster a weak smile when kids came up to me. Or puppies.

*Carl:* Bummer. I’d always thought you were fully human as well as being fully God . . . Wait. You’re playing with me, aren’t you, J-Man?

*Jesus:* Gotcha! So, a Catholic and a Baptist walk into a bar . . . stop me if you’ve heard this one.<sup>46</sup>

For years, strips like Johnny Hart’s *B.C.* has been a frequent source of religious commentary. Hart himself considers his strip to be a ministry, “using it as a pulpit to communicate his Christian message.”<sup>47</sup> Today, cartoonist Cuyler Black addresses the place of humor in ministry in an interview found on his *Inherit the Mirth* website. His response to a question about the balance between humor and offense:

I like to think of my humor as being playfully reverent, or reverently playful. I love God. I’m excited to help emphasize an often under-appreciated facet of His personality—His humor. I always pray that He’ll keep me within boundaries acceptable to Him. When it comes to having some fun with folks like Moses or Noah or the disciples, for example, I see them as fair game for some affectionate laughs at their expense because they’re human like you and me, with flaws and foibles. When it comes to Jesus, I’ll use Him in my cartoons but never make fun of Him. The humor will lie somewhere other than at His expense. And speaking of Jesus, I believe that much of His ministry involved a core message of “Hey, people, lighten up!”<sup>48</sup>

How *do* we lighten up? If, as theologian Karl Barth maintains, “Laughter is the closest thing to God’s grace,”<sup>49</sup> it stands to reason that developing a theology of prayer that involves humor is not just desirable, but imperative.

Newspaper comics that do refer to or include prayer tend to focus on topics that are in some way universal. We laugh when *Nancy*

prays for a freak snowstorm in May, because we know that we have prayed for ridiculous things for ridiculous reasons. We laugh when *Get Fuzzy's* Bucky Katt worships the electric can opener, because we, too, have been guilty of misplaced loyalties, praise, and adoration. We laugh when Jon's bedtime prayers are interrupted by the sound of Garfield opening the refrigerator, because we know how difficult it can be to pray in the midst of hectic lives and competing demands for our attention, however noble our intentions may be.

We laugh because religion is a touchy subject. We laugh because religion is really about relationship and relationships can be, if we are at all honest, screamingly funny. Let us laugh.